

[Mary Anne Meehan]

ORIGINAL MSS. OR FIELD NOTES (Check one)

PUB. Living Lore in

New England

TITLE Irish Cook - Brookfield #1

WRITER Louise G. Bassett

DATE 1/20/39 WDS. P.P. 9

CHECKER DATE

SOURCE GIVEN (?) Interview

COMMENTS Mary Anne Meehan - Irish Cook Mass. 1938-9

STATE Massachusetts

NAME OF WORKER Louise G. Bassett

ADDRESS Brookfield

DATE January 20, 1939

SUBJECT Living Lore

NAME OF INFORMANT Mary Anne Meehan

ADDRESS Brookfield,

Library of Congress

Mary Anne Meehan is Irish with all the wit, independence and pride characteristic of her racial heritage. She is in her seventies - just where, she won't tell, and you had better not ask. All her life she has been active, working hard, helping her brothers and sisters to rear families, never stinting her friends or families when she had it to give. A great part of her life she worked as a cook - and there's none any better.

Cooks are traditionally supposed to have bad tempers. Mary Anne's isn't bad - just hot and furious while it lasts. Her pet aversion is to be treated like a servant. "I'm a cook and a good one, and I'm as good as any of youh be and don't forget it."

Name: Louise G. Bassett

Title: Living Lore

Assignment: Brookfield

Topic: Mary Anne Meehan

The radio was on, a symphony orchestra was playing softly and beautifully, but we were chatting because two of the group "just love music" but evidently didn't care to "listen."

An argument was on and a lively young woman was telling her aunt how "she" felt about it[.?] This was the argument.

"She wouldn't do it if I was her mother, I'd positively forbid it," said the older woman.

"Wise parents don't 'positively' forbid their children nowadays," said the niece.

"Well, no wonder children are no good these days. When I was a girl my parents told me what I could do an' what I couldn't do an' I obeyed 'em," was the aunt's dignified reply.

Library of Congress

"Oh, go along with you youh, Lil," said Mary Anne Meehan, who had been listening quietly to the argument, " You Youh didn't obey nobody. You'd Youh'd pretend to, but don't try to tell in my hearin' that you youh ever obeyed nobody, I know you youh, I know you youh from way back. Besides kids is smarter nowadays then we was, lots smarter."

"Children was as bright them days as they are today - brighter, if th' truth be told," retorted Lil.

"Oh, phooey, how could we be, look what children have nowadays - take th' radio - take what we're hearin' now - only we ain't hearin' it. But jes' look at th' fine music alone. When we was kids we'd hear a couple o' sour noted souprranos in church an' maybe some lad who could play th' mouth organ or th' jews ' harp. Did we ever hear any good 2 [/Music?]? We did not.

"An' kids ken hear all kind of lectures an' th' little devils listen, too, an' ken tell youh 'bout 'em. Imaging us listenin' to a lecture. An' th' movies is grand for 'em too. They learn all kinds of things lookin' at movies, an' they're as interested in th' news reels as we be."

"Well, I can't agree with you," says Lil.

"I wouldn't expect you to. You're still hurrahin' for the' good old horse an' buggy days but youh'd stick up youh're nose if some one ast youh to ride in one."

The look the two ladies exchanged might be called a "glare."

"Youh know I'm right, youh're jest stubborn," said Mary Anne, "Talk about th' old days! What did we have that was so fine, I ask you youh now - what did we have? An' at that we had a darn sight more'n th' poor devils before us had.

"Those hoopskirts my mother used to wear when I was a little kid, I cen see her now. If she forgot to reach down an' grab th' hoop at th' back a little when she went in to sit down in th'

Library of Congress

pews at church - Whoopee — up it would go in front an' show her white panties with hand made lace on 'em an' would th' darlin' blush? She'd get so red you'd think she's set afire to something. An' the' yards an' yards of cloth there'd be in a dress that we'd have to carry round. Lord, how'd we ever do it. It took anywhere from eleven to twelve yards to make a dress in them days.”

“If you ast me I think it was nearer fourteen,” offers Lil.

3

“Yep, maybe youh're right - our skirts had to come to th' ground, you wan't fit for anybody to speak to if youh're ankle showed th' least little speck.

“Remember now we used to dress when we went in bathin'? Long stockin's, long sleeves, a full skirt that come half ways down youh're legs - full [bloomers?] an' a waist that covered every speck of youh that was left to see.”

“Which wan't much, th' Lord knows,” added Lil.

“[“Did?”] you girls ever wear hoopskirts?” I asked.

“Well, they was jest about goin' out when I come along,” said Mary Anne, “But what we wore was 'bout as bad - maybe worse. Th' skirts was lined all through with linin' an' they was faced up from [th'?] bottom about eight inches with th' stiffest kine of crinoline to make 'em stick out. When we walked along th' street we had to hold up our skirts on both sides to keep 'em from gettin' wet or full of dust.

“Golly, if we had had th' kind of shoes we're wearin' now we would have been in terrible trouble. We wore high buttoned shoes, th' highest was the styliest. When I was a kid we used to have our measure taken in our stockin' feet. We'd stand on a rule layin' flat on th' floor they were shaped on a last made cut'n wood an' cut from a big piece of calf skin.

Library of Congress

Th' soles was fastened on with wooden pegs - th' laces was leather an' they was always comin' untied. Huh, so youh think th' old times was best.

"Maybe youh think th' [hooole?] skirt was somethin' to run a fever over. Didn't we look funny waddlin' along an' when we tried to get up in a buggy we needed to be acrobats. An' then th' Merry Widow hats - brims 4 like an umbrella an' a million hat pins to keep 'em on."

The room was quiet as the ladies no doubt went back over the years.

"Did you go to school here, Mary Anne?" I asked.

"Well, some, though 'twant much schoolin' I got. You see, my mother was a widow with five children - three girls an' two boys. I come along first, then was Gussie, then Jane, Henry, an' Bill, so I had to scramble out an' help bring in th' pennies. Gussie was smart an' so was Jane - she married George Chapin, here in Brookfield. I did everything an' anything - ran errands - took care of babies when I was just a kid. And I made bread an' pies an' cakes and didn't have much of a task sellin' 'em neither, only there wan' much profit in 'em.

"Here's a funny thing I did an' I kine of liked to do it, too. Everybody used steel knives an' forks, that is most everybody did, th' rich folks had silver ones, of course. But I got a lot of regular places where I went an' cleaned th' knives an' forks so many times a week. You Youh got to hand it to some women th' way they can get out of doin' work. I know some of 'em told their husbands they wanted to help my mother but I knew it was because they was lazy.

"Then, another thing I did was to make soap. I made awful good home-made soap an' could sell all I made."

"Was it hard work?" I asked.

"Lord no, all us kids made or fixed a hollow log on a sort of big flat stone an' th' stone was set up on a kine of a table like, an' 5 then we put a kettle under to catch th' lye. We put

Library of Congress

little pieces of wood in th' log to make a drain-like an' then put ashes an' lime in 'till th' kettle was full. Then we'd pour water in, a little at a time, until th' kettle was full."

"Did you make this soap or did th' family make it. you You keep sayin' 'we?'" inquired Lil.

"I made it," with indignation. "They just helped get things ready. We had neighbors who saved all their fats for me - all kinses of fat I could use. Then, after th' kettle was full I'd put th' fat an' lye in a big boiler an' then I'd light a fire an' cook it till it was right. An' that's where I come in, Mrs. Lil. 'Cause if you don't know jest th' right time to take th' soap off, th' whole thing's a mess, an' all th' work is up th' spout. When it was jest right I'd put it in a big wooden tub an' it was so good I had regular customers.

"Another thing I did was to make butter - you youh know - churn it for women who hated to do it an' I earned every darn cent I got, I can tell the Western Hemisphere. Most everybody had what was called a 'dash churn'. It was 'bout three feet high th' cover was fastened down tight - it had a round hole in th' middle of th' lid an' a stick like a broom stick went down in th' churn an' on th' bottom of this stick a lot of flat paddles was fastened.

"Th' cream was put in an' then I'd flop th' handle up an' down an' round an' round till th' butter come. I was always a wreck when I got through churnin'. We used to put th' milk in big tin pans an' let 6 th' cream raise. We didn't know nothing about milk in bottles those days."

"Did you know anything about gardenin', anything about vegetables?" I asked.

"Did I know anything about raisin' vegetables. I ask you, did I know anything about raising vegetables?" Mary Anne was indignant. "I wish I had a dollar for every hour I bothered about our garden or vegetable patch, as we always called it. We had a pretty good sized lot all made into a vegetable patch. Corn an' potatoes had to be dropped by hand. We made a furrow an' put in th' fertilizer, then we'd put in about five kernels of corn an' for th'

Library of Congress

potatoes usually two pieces. Potatoe bugs an' corn borers had not begun callin' on us then - thank th' Lord.

"I tell you what I used to sell a lot of an' made a right smart lot of change an' I liked to do it, too, which helped. I made candles. My mother knew how to make candles an' I learned how. I made good ones, too, especially my bayberry ones. When you had one of my bayberry candles, you knew it was a bayberry candle."

"Wonderful, murmured Lil, "didn't you know it when anybody else made 'em?"

"Nope, most of 'em don't have any of th' smell of th' berry, I used to make 'em so you youh jest liked to be near 'em until they was all burnt up."

"Wasn't it hard to do?" I asked.

7

"No-o, kine of fussy but not hard after you youh once get th' hang of it. My mother had some molds made of tin an' they'd all be put in a line together, so's there'd be a dozen of 'em, two rows of six on each side. Across th' top an' th' larger end we put two wires, one for each six candles. Then over these wires we put th' wicks that we'd double then we pushed th' ends down through each mold to th' openin' at th' bottom an' then we drew 'em tight. When th' wicks was all in place th' melted tallow was poured in an' I'd let it get cold an' hard . Then I'd cut th' small end an' pull th' wires an' they'd pull th' candles from th' molds an' want hard at tall to slip out.

"People used candles those days most all th' time, for their bed rooms an' to find their way round an' I sold as many as I could make.

"I must tell you about a business my brother Hen (Henry) thought he'd go in. He had a sign painted - 'Henry Meehan, Tailor' an' he wanted me to go in with him. I thought it was grand of him to want me to be with him an' I was all fluttery.

Library of Congress

"My mother could darn so's you couldn't tell it was done, so, I dashed from house to house an' got things to mend an' people thought we was pretty good an' we could see ourselves' gettin' rich fast.

"But a lad named Bernard Butler, we always called him 'Butch', had an uncle die an' his aunt give Butch one of his uncles' suits an' he brung it to Hen to make over. He wanted it smaller."

"Oh, Lord," said Lil in a faint tone.

"Great goodness," I said, "how did he dare take such a chance."

"Oh, Butch Butler never had no sense," piped Lil.

"Butch wan't but a little runt an' I guess his uncle weighed 8 two hundred pounds. Well, we cut it down for him in' he was th' funniest lookin' creature when he got it on, you ever see. The coat hung on him like a bag. We had cut an' cut but 'twan't no use. He looked like a match in a fifty acre lot, but Hen did what some cheap little tailors do some times. When Butch was lookin' at hisself, in front, Hen would grab the back an' sort of gather it together, an' then when Butch would look at the back, Hen would do like that in front. An' th' pants _____"

Mary Anne was laughing so heartily she could scarcely speak.

"Mary Anne Meehan, you're making this up," I cried.

"I'm tellin' you th' [god's?] God's truth, but wait till I tell you about the pants, they took th' cake. One leg was shorter then th' tother one. One dragged fully three - four itches an' tother one was nearly half up to his knee an' th' front pockets met in th' back. We was scared to cut out all th' goods, so we made a big box pleat in th' back. An' will you believe me Butch was mad, didn't like th' suit a'tall. Well, that job sort of discouraged us, our trade

Library of Congress

fell off some thing terrible an' so we decided to give up th' tailorin' business, for good and all.

"But we got along somehow though it wasn't easy for any of us. It wan't nickels an' dimes those days. Some times one of us kids got hold of a penny but that wan't often.

"One of th' horrors of my life was th' underwear with long legs[.?] [My?] legs were fat an' I used to try so hard to lap th' legs over smooth but I never could. They was always bunchy lookin' , th' boys used to yell 'piano legs' at me. That broke my heart.

"But we had our little thrills. I can remember how tickled I was when I could have a hat trimmed at th' milliners, probably with th' same trimmin's as I had had before only put on different. I can see th' milliner now come out of the trimmin' room with my 'new' hat in her hand. It would make me feel so proud, an' only cost thirty-five cents, to have done, cause there was three of us girls. A wholesale price."

"You were happy in those days, weren't you Mary Anne."

"Sure we were. I don't know why though 'cause we never had too much of anything and / many's the time we didn't have enough of anythin'. But we was young and ready to lick th' world and make th' world like it. And my mother was no slouch. She never gave in - no matter how tough it got."

"You see, what did I tell you," Lil's voice was triumphant, "Children them days was smarter, loads smarter than the kids today. What children today would do the things you did?"

"Oh, forget it," said Mary Anne, "I'll get you all some coffee. I've talked so much my throat's dry."